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Grand Forks Herald

our opinion

Federal funds for humanities need review

Ronald Reagan has promised to find ways to save federal money. One place to look is at the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The humanities program was begun as a way to involve scholars in discussion of public policy issues, but it has become a closed network that benefits only a few people. The requirements for eligibility are narrow. In North Dakota, there are fewer than 300 people who qualify as humanists and almost all of them are employed at colleges and universities. The state humanities council had \$120,000 in grant funds to supplement their incomes last year. In practice, far fewer people actually received money. In 1980, \$85,000 went to 19 individuals, each of whom received \$1,000 or more. One person got \$17,000.

The programs provided by the North Dakota Council on the Humanities often reach few people outside the academic community. A program on energy, for example, drew so few people in 1979 that it was abandoned. In 1980, the council's traveling Chautauqua sometimes played to nearly empty tents. A television series on North Dakota history funded by the council has never been broadcast.

Beyond these practical failures, there are deeply troubling philosophical questions about the humanities program. Is it necessary to pay people to take part in public policy discussions? Does paying them influence the discussion? Should the government be providing money to supplement the incomes of people whose salaries it already pays?

Officials of the North Dakota Council on the Humanities are well-satisfied with their program and national humanities officials praise it as a model for the rest of the nation. Minnesota's program has tried to emulate methods used in North Dakota to reach people outside the Twin Cities area. These individuals have an obvious interest in continuing the program.

We are not convinced that the program is worthwhile, however. The Reagan administration should take a close look at it.